

A stylized graphic of a family consisting of two adults and a child, rendered in orange and blue colors, positioned behind the main title.

What You Need to Know About



Tennessee Department of Human Services

We all want the best for ourselves and our families. But sometimes, a divorce, a health problem or a job loss can make day-to-day living hard. The people at the Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) know that a personal crisis can hold you and your family back.

The **FAMILIES FIRST** program can help you through hard times. You will be able to take care of yourself and your family once again.

WHAT IS FAMILIES FIRST?

The **FAMILIES FIRST** program gives temporary cash payments to families in need. It is a program about work, training, and taking personal responsibility.

If you get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash, you must agree to follow a **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY PLAN**. You and DHS will work out a plan based on your needs, skills and interests.



WHY WORK?

A steady job gives you and your family security.

- Work gives you and your children more benefits.
- Your children will develop a healthy attitude toward work.
- A good work history proves that you are dependable and can help you get a better job.
- The best job training is actual work.
- After you get a job, you can apply for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This means you may get extra cash in your paycheck.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

If you get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash, you will work with your caseworker to make your own **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY PLAN (PRP)**.

In your PRP, you must:

- make sure your children get immunizations and health checks;
- make sure your children go to kindergarten and school regularly;
- cooperate with child support requirements; and
- agree to work and/or training if you're not exempt.

Minor parents under 18 must:

- go to school regularly; and, usually,
- live at home with parents or a responsible adult.



WORK AND TRAINING

FAMILIES FIRST can help you get a job or the training you need to find a job.

- You must agree to work or be in work-related activities for 40 hours a week, unless you are exempt.
- Parents who are in school or training must complete the rest of their 40-hour plan in a work activity, unless they are exempt.
- You will have a chance to complete high school, earn a GED and get job training.
- If you are already in college or vocational school, your work plan may let you continue.
- When not working, you must be involved in activities to help you find a job.
- If you are working full-time, we will help you look for ways to improve your income.
- If you cannot find a job, you may be given a work experience assignment.

PENALTIES

FAMILIES FIRST is based on the idea of personal responsibility. It is important that you work closely with your caseworker to try and reach your goals. Your caseworker needs to know if you are having problems with your work or education goals.

If you don't work to meet your goals, you may lose your FAMILIES FIRST cash.

- If you don't cooperate with child support requirements, you may lose your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash.
- If you CAN work but refuse or fail to follow your work plan without a good reason, you may lose your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash.
- If you quit a job without a good reason, you may lose your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash for three months.

If you cannot follow your work plan, you must call your caseworker to talk about the reasons.

(Penalties continued)

In addition, your FAMILIES FIRST cash may be cut if:

- your children don't get immunizations and health check-ups; or
- your children don't attend kindergarten and school regularly.

Your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash may stop because of a sanction, time limits, or some other reason. If this happens, a Health Department staff person will visit your family. The Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Health Department want to be sure that you and your children are OK.

TIME LIMITS

You can receive Families First cash only for a limited time. So, it is important to meet your work and education goals quickly.

- Most families can get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash for only 18 months at a time.
- Most families can get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash for only 5 years in their lifetime.
- You may be **EXEMPT** from time limits if you are:
 - disabled;
 - 60 years old or older;
 - taking full-time care of an in-home family member; or
 - getting **FAMILIES FIRST** cash for a child, but not yourself.
- Sometimes, the **FAMILIES FIRST** time limits can be extended.

SUPPORT SERVICES

DHS can help while you are working on your education or job training goals. We can help with child care, transportation, dental and optical needs and other support services. Some services are also offered for a limited time after you go to work.

TRANSITIONAL SERVICES

When your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash ends you may get:

- child care for up to 18 months;
- TennCare Medicaid for you and your children for up to 18 months;
- Food Stamps;
- the same amount of food stamps for 5 months if your case closes because you go to work;
- a rent freeze if you live in public housing;
- help from Employment Career Services to find a better job; and
- help from Family Services Counseling with the problems of daily living.

CHILD SUPPORT

Many families would not need **FAMILIES FIRST** help if they were getting child support payments. If you receive **FAMILIES FIRST** cash, you must help DHS and the local child support office get child support for your children. You will be expected to:

- name the absent parent of your children; and
- give information about the absent parent. This will help Child Support find the absent parent and prove he is the father.

Computer Tracking

The DHS computer system helps DHS find parents who are working but not paying child support.

Tennessee parents who do not pay child support when they are supposed to may lose their:

- driver's licenses;
- professional job licenses; or
- hunting or fishing licenses.



CASH BENEFITS

The amount of your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash:

- depends on the amount of income your family has;
- may not go down if you get married and report it timely;
- may not go up if you have another child.

ELIGIBILITY

To be able to get **FAMILIES FIRST** you must:

- be at least 6 months pregnant; or
- have a child whose parent or parents are absent, dead, incapacitated, unemployed or underemployed; and
- be related to the child (parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, sister, brother, cousin); and
- have a child who is under age 18, or 19, if still in high school; and
- be a United States citizen or a legal alien who meets certain conditions; and
- live in Tennessee while getting **FAMILIES FIRST** cash; and
- have a social security number or have applied for one for the individuals who want **FAMILIES FIRST**; and
- have monthly income below a certain amount set by the state; and
- not be on strike; and
- agree to follow a **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY PLAN (PRP)**.

You can have some cash and other resources and still be able to get **FAMILIES FIRST**. You may:

- own a home;
- have cash or other personal property valued up to \$2,000 (bank accounts, stocks, bonds, etc.);
- have a car with an equity value of less than \$4,600. Any value over \$4,600 will count toward the maximum \$2,000 personal property amount.

HOW TO APPLY

Contact your local DHS office to apply for **FAMILIES FIRST** benefits. Then, complete a one-page application and have an interview with your caseworker.

- Before you go to the interview, ask what papers you should bring. You can ask your caseworker for help getting the information.
- After you apply, you will get a letter in the mail within 45 days. It will let you know if you can get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash. Call or visit your local DHS office if you don't receive your letter or don't agree with the decision about your **FAMILIES FIRST**.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- You have the right to appeal if you disagree with a decision on your **FAMILIES FIRST** case.
- You must appeal within 90 days.
- If you get a letter that your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash will be cut or stopped, you can keep getting your **FAMILIES FIRST** cash if you appeal within 10 days.
- If you get **FAMILIES FIRST** cash you are not supposed to get, you may have to repay the money.
- You must tell your caseworker about any change in your income or family situation within 10 days.
- The law protects you against any kind of discrimination.

FAMILIES FIRST can help you and your family become independent. Let us help you take the first steps to a better life.

NOTES

My caseworker's name is _____

The DHS county office phone number is _____



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